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FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7042
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1884
RUCLRFA/USDA WASHDC
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000201

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [ENRG](#) [EAGR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - March 21, 2008

1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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Civil Society

2. Opposition Rallies in Support Of Political Prisoners

Over 20 opposition activists demonstrated in downtown Minsk March 16 to display solidarity with political prisoners Aleksandr Kozulin and Andrey Kim. Police ordered the activists to disperse almost immediately. Brest-based supporters rallied March 14 at a local stadium and called for the unconditional release of Kozulin. Road police there briefly pulled over some activists to check their vehicles and belongings. Unidentified plainclothes police observed and recorded the authorized demonstration. No one was detained in either city.

3. Pro-GOB "Belaya Rus" Membership Rises

Education Minister and Chairman of GOB-run NGO Belaya Rus Aleksandr Radkov reported March 15 that the organization's membership surpassed 50,000. He emphasized that Belaya Rus established branches "in almost all organizations," and that a conference to develop an agenda will be held May 17. Founded last November by well-known GOB officials, university heads, sportsmen, and political figures, Belaya Rus activities will focus on supporting GOB policies.

14. BKGB Admits Control over Internet Access

Deputy Chief of the BKGB's Antiterrorism Center Vyacheslav Linenko admitted at a press conference March 14 that the BKGB exercises control over access to internet websites on the territory of Belarus. He reiterated that "unnecessary knowledge" presented on various internet resources should be "classified" and "limited to individuals who can understand it correctly." According to Linenko, the BKGB filters access to websites with content about terrorist activities or sites that incite such activities. He confirmed the national telecom monopoly Beltelekom "has a police system of internet filters," and that "both filters and barriers are possible" to limit access in Belarus.

15. Opposition Newspapers Temporarily Seized

Police seized 50,000 copies of opposition newspapers "Narodnaya Volya" and "Tovarisch" March 19 en route to Minsk from their printing house in Smolensk, Russia. "Tovarisch" Deputy Editor Dmitriy Yanenko stated the prints were released two and a half hours later after a thorough check of the accompanying documents and content of the newspapers. The police gave no explanation for their action, but Yanenko suggested authorities were interested in monitoring information about the upcoming March 25 demonstration in commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Belarusian National Republic.

16. Opposition Members Fired for Political Activities

Free Theater actresses Anna Solomyanskaya and Marina Yurevich were fired from state-run theaters March 18. The National Academic Drama Theater administration did not renew Solomyanskaya's employment contract upon its expiration, and the Belarusian Army Drama Theater dismissed Yurevich due to her trip to London with the Free Theater's

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international tour. Free Theater has now only one actor also employed by a state theater. In a separate case, administrators at a university in Mozyr fired Belarusian Christian Democracy activist Pavel Nozdrya March 14 over alleged absence from work. Nozdrya argued he did not violate any terms of his labor contract and was sacked for his "active civil position."

Domestic Economy

17. Industrial and Agricultural Output on the Rise

Belarus' Statistics Ministry announced March 17 that the country's industrial output in January-February rose 12.9 percent on the year. The fastest growing sectors were engineering and metalworking which rose 18.2 percent; pulp and paper, up 17.4 percent; and construction, up 15.2 percent. Belarus' light industry output decreased during the period by two percent. The country's agricultural production grew 6.4 percent.

18. Chernobyl-Area Food Processors to Resume Work

Prime Minister Sergey Sidorskiy announced March 19 that food processing companies in Chernobyl-affected areas should resume operation. In the announcement, the premier said that since the government already spent significant funds on Chernobyl aid, "the money should pay off and enterprises should work." Emergency Management Minister Enver Bariyev said that 27 farms changed location last year in order to make products with admissible levels of radiation. BYR 625.3 billion (USD 292 million) in state budget expenditures are projected for Chernobyl relief efforts this year.

International Trade

19. Energy Imports to Rise, Potash Price Increases

Belarus' Statistics Ministry announced March 17 that the country's year-on-year imports of power supplies grew substantially this year.

Belarus imported 2.4 times more crude oil in January, 41 percent more oil products and 13.9 percent more natural gas. The Statistics Ministry also announced that the average price for Belarusian-made potash fertilizers increased 21.2 percent on the year in 2007 to USD 310 per ton. Belarus exported 9.9 percent more fertilizers in 2007 amounting to a total of 4.3 million tons. Exports increased to China (20.4 percent), Brazil (31.6 percent), and Poland (30 percent), but decreased to the U.S. (30.6 percent) and India (23.2 percent).

10. Quote of the Week

Central Election Commission Chairwoman Lidiya Yermoshina, hinting about Lukashenko's plans for 2011:

"I think he will take advantage of his right under the constitution to run for president again. As long as he is supported by the people, and he has the strength for this difficult work, he will participate in the elections."

Moore